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THE CLASSICAL CONFERENCE OF 1906 IN PHILADELPHIA

In Four Parts—Part II

The second speaker of the day, Professor J C Rolfe, spoke on The Ideal Course:

In the discussion of this question two points must be emphasized by way of introduction. The first is that we are considering the ideal Latin course preparatory to college. That is to say, we have in mind the interests of those students who are planning to add to their course in school three or four years of further work. It may be that some of these students will drop Latin early in their college course, or even at the close of their school work; but none the less the study of Latin is for them a preparation for higher work along some line. That this study is regarded by some experts as good preparation even for the study of engineering was shown by the Symposium on the subject held at the Classical Conference at Ann Arbor, Michigan, last March.*

I do not know that there are any secondary schools which do not include such students among their patrons, although many, of course have, in addition, a certain number who do not expect to go to college. Whether this circumstance should influence the nature of the course, or the way in which it is conducted, does not enter into the question before us, but I may say in passing that I do not think that it should. The aim of education is not knowledge, but power and discipline, and the formation of right habits of work. These are of far more value than the acquirement of a certain amount of miscellaneous and ill-digested information.

The student who is going to college needs above all a knowledge of the language, shown by the ability to translate it into English, which involves some knowledge of its grammar.

Possibly some objections which may have already arisen in the minds of some of my hearers may be removed by the statement of the second point, which is that I have assumed that by the ideal preparatory course is meant the ideal four years' course. In the strictest sense of the word the ideal course would be one of five or six years. Such courses were known long ago—we had a five years' course in the Cambridge High School back in the seventies of the last century—and they are found in the schools at present; but as yet they are unhappily decidedly in the minority and should in fairness be left out of

account. The same thing is true of the courses in some of our stronger schools, which carry students a year or two beyond the requirements for admission to college. This is really college work, and would naturally be conducted as such.

Since Latin is unquestionably a difficult language, a four years' course devoted to it would seem to have been a success, if it gives a student on his admission to college the ability to read fluently with a reasonably correct pronunciation—one will readily subscribe to the epigrammatic saying of Smyth and Benner in the Preface to their *Beginners' Book in Greek*, that pedantry in pronunciation is an abomination—to translate into good idiomatic English, to understand what he has read, and to turn simple English narrative into Latin. This is by no means so easy a task as it might appear, and few there be that attain all these ends.

The first year should, I think, be devoted to the elements of the language, as presented in some one of the numerous books for Beginners. Most of these contain easy reading of some sort, either simplified Caesar, or something similar, and there are besides various separate books which furnish reading which is less difficult than Caesar. Caesar should be postponed to the second year, and the *Beginners' Book* should not be hurried over, but should be thoroughly studied and assimilated. The most important part of a building is its foundation, and surely there is enough to do in the first year without entering directly on the undoubted difficulties of the Gallic War.

The choice of Caesar as the first Latin author to be read in school seems at present almost unanimous. Every now and then there is a revolt against this choice, and these periods are marked by the corpses of books of Selections and by a sporadic edition or two of Nepos. Such a time will doubtless come around again, *volventibus annis*, even as our carefully preserved high hats pass in and out of fashion, but the popularity of Caesar seems to be unshaken by such revolutions. To what extent this is the result of conservatism and of the unwillingness of teachers to venture on unfamiliar ground, and how far it represents the result of careful thought and deliberate conviction, it is not easy to say.

Under these circumstances I do not see how we can escape the necessity of making the immortal Commentaries a *corpus vile* for the purpose of training the young student to read and translate Latin, and to increase his knowledge of Latin grammar. For this purpose four books are quite enough. The old-fashioned grammatical drill fell into disrepute years ago, and undoubtedly it was carried too far. But, as usually happens in such cases, the pendulum swung too far in the opposite direction, and we were in danger of teaching no grammar at all. It has, however, already begun its backward swing. It is true that Caesar's Gallic War is a great literary masterpiece, which should be read in its entirety, and that it offers unusual opportunities for the study of history, geography, ethnology, and military antiqui-

*Published in full in the School Review for June, 1906, and in the Michigan Alumnus for October and November, 1906. Reprints may be obtained from Mr Louis P Jocelyn, Sec'y Schoolmasters' Club, S Division St, Ann Arbor, Mich.

ties. But these are not for the student of Latin in his second year. Only under the most favorable circumstances can more than four books be read with profit, and in some cases I am sure that it would be better to read somewhat less than that. I should like to see our entrance examinations made of such a kind as to test the student's ability to read Caesar, leaving to the individual teacher to decide how much ground he can profitably cover in any given year, as well as whether he prefers to read consecutively from the beginning or in selections.

It is an old question whether the third year's work should be in Cicero or in Vergil. I really do not think it makes a great deal of difference, though personally I should be inclined to postpone Vergil to the last year and to make the student as familiar as possible with the usages of prose before taking up the additional difficulties of poetical style. There are other reasons for preferring this order, and doubtless equally strong arguments can be brought forward on the other side. I think each teacher should be allowed to decide this question for himself. In the case of Cicero the question of selection does not enter into the problem to any great extent, since most teachers are in practical agreement as to five of the six orations required for admission to college. Here my feeling is the same as in the case of Caesar. Six orations are enough, fewer might in some cases be better, the choice should be free, and the test should be the ability to translate.

So, too, with Vergil. Here again we have a great masterpiece, which should be read entire, while a year is barely sufficient for covering the half of it. That less than six books might give better results might be inferred to be my opinion from what I have already said, and two teachers have recently expressed the same opinion with regard to Vergil and the other preparatory Latin in *The Latin Leaflet* for Nov 5 and 19 of the current year.

I cannot agree with Dr Riess (*Leaflet* Nov 5, 1906) that the reading of the fifth and sixth books of the Aeneid in preparatory schools is little short of criminal. The great interest of the former for the average school-boy more than counterbalances the unquestioned difficulty of the vocabulary, and while it is true that the sixth presents puzzles which are almost insoluble by the trained antiquarian, they lie for the most part outside of the ken of the school-boy. I remember that we read the sixth book in school and enjoyed it greatly. We thought that we understood it, though we knew nothing of philosophy and had not so much as heard of eschatology. At the same time I have respect for Dr Riess' opinion and I think it is little short of criminal that, thinking as he does, he should be compelled to read the sixth book either by the college entrance requirements or by any other influence.

While I believe, as I have said, that the exact requirements in Caesar, Cicero and Vergil should not be rigidly insisted on, I do not believe that the preparatory course should be excessively shortened. While a good idiomatic translation should be insisted on, a thing which takes time, it is possible to go too far in this direction and to waste time in too scrupulously weighing the meaning of words and debating the exact force of synonyms.

My own experience leads me to think that students need, perhaps, more than anything else to be taught how to prepare their lessons, and here is possibly a line along which we may strive for a

higher ideal. The thorough supervision of a student's preparation for his class-room work is probably an unattainable ideal. It would involve something like the new preceptorial plan recently adopted by Princeton University, and would be too expensive for most schools. Still it might be realized in part by skilful questioning and by an occasional exercise in sight-translation, or something similar, for example, the preparation in the class room of the lesson of the following day. I find myself becoming more and more curious about the way in which my students attack a difficult sentence, and the reasons which cause them to fail in mastering it. I am convinced that it is not enough to assign a given amount of Latin to be translated and then to hear a recitation on it. It is important to know just how the student prepared his lesson, and to help him, if possible, to do this in the most effective and time-saving manner. I find that very few students know how to use their notes. They turn to them now and then for help in translating a word or a phrase, but otherwise they make little use of them. It is doubtless true that some editions of the school-classics are unwisely annotated—that they are furnished with notes which rather display the learning of the editor than show his appreciations of the needs of school-boys—and it may be that even in the better editions there are occasional lapses. Still, I incline to think that the majority of such books are well and carefully made, with the idea of giving help where long experience in the class-room has shown that help is needed, and that the student should be made to study them. He should also be taught how to use his vocabulary and how to go to work to solve the difficulties of a long and involved sentence. The entrance examination should consist, in part at least, of sight translation, and the student's training should enable him to read Latin which he has not previously worked over. In order to do this he must learn the meanings of words, so that when he meets them he will recognize them as old acquaintances. He must know his forms thoroughly, so that he will have no question in his mind as to whether a given word is in the genitive, the dative or the ablative. He must know, for instance, that *omne* or *facile* is a nominative or accusative, and not an ablative—an elementary point, it is true, but one which is rarely fixed permanently in mind. He must be able to distinguish an indicative from a subjunctive, and a present from a future or a perfect, and he must realize that the moods and the tenses are signs which he cannot overlook in translating.

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